

THE SICILIAN VESPERS.

THE terrible massacre known by the above title took place at Easter, in the year 1282. It was but a verification of the old proverb of the trodden worm turning to bite its oppressor's foot. At this period the Sicilians were ruled over by a French prince of the House of Anjou, with a tyranny of the most cruel and galling nature. Obnoxious to the Sicilians from his nation, the people had as well to bear the presence of a licentious and brutal alien soldiery, to whom nothing was sacred; and the history of the times teems with accounts of the coarse insults to which husbands and fathers of all classes had to submit, as offered to those who were nearest and dearest of their families. Under such a long course of oppression, it was but little wonder that the hot fire of Italian wrath should be smouldering, and waiting but for some slight fanning to leap into a devastating flame that should destroy all before it. The occasion arrived. Easter Monday being a grand fête day, a procession of the people of Palermo was formed to attend vespers at a neighbouring church; when the French rulers, who gazed with suspicion upon all gatherings of the people, made this a pretext for searching for arms. To a brutal, licentious soldiery, this supplied an opportunity for offering gross insults to the females, one of whom was a young married lady of great beauty and position. Her screams aroused the multitude; the spark was laid to the train; and, led by the lady's father and husband, the people rose in tumult. Arms were seized, and an indiscriminate slaughter of all the French in the city was the result.

This was but the alarm note for a general rising; and in town after town, upon that same day, massacres took place, the news flying swiftly, till not a place remained in the hands of the French but Messina. So hot was the people's rage, and so long a reign of cruelty had they to avenge, that mercy was forgotten, neither sex nor age was spared—French nationality being the password for death. Fortresses were attacked and carried, sharp and decisive engagements took place, and garrison after garrison was slaughtered; Messina only remaining at last to be taken to free the island from the foreign yoke. But here a pause ensued; many of the more substantial inhabitants fearing the power of the insurgents as opposed to that of the trained soldiery. But again a spark illumined the fire. A citizen was seized by the French for appearing in public bearing arms. He resisted, aided by friends; but being overcome, they were borne off to prison; when, not content with the conquest, the viceroy sent to arrest the prisoners' wives. This injustice roused the people, who flew to

arms, attacked the French, and slaughtered above three thousand, driving the others into their fortresses, which they took after an obstinate defence, and put the defenders to the sword.

The insurrection, commencing as it did on the night of the Palermo procession, has since been known by the name of the Sicilian Vespers. The number of French put to the sword has been variously estimated at from twenty to thirty thousand; but, whatever the number, the slaughter was fierce and indiscriminate; and, in spite of after-efforts to recover the territory, Sicily was from that time lost to the reigning King of Naples, Charles of Anjou.

